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THE PLAN FOR GOLDEN GATE PARK

Working Paper #1 - Brief History of Golden Gate Park

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THE PLAN
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Working Paper #1 - Brief History of Golden Gate Park

Golden Gate Park is human history, embodying the sustained vision and dedicated labor of countless individuals.

The evolution of Golden Gate Park into a second century of existence is due in part to the vision of the original designer, William Hammond Hall, who defined the urban park as a "Portion of land with the semblance of natural formation but adapted by art to the requirements of large and varied bodies of pleasure seekers", and in large measure to John McLaren, the "boss gardener", who guided and protected the Park for more than fifty years with restrained pattern of development and vigilant attitude of defense.

aren Lodge, Golden Gate Park

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In the 1850's Golden Gate Park was part of an area known as the " Outside Lands". Title to these largely windswept and forbidding sand dunes had been in litigation with the Federal Government ever since the City of San Francisco became sucessor to the Mexican Pueblo de San Francisco. To further complicate matters "Squatters", established homesteaders as well as land speculators, occupied the land and claimed ownership by right of possession. In 1864 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Field upheld a Circuit Court ruling which confirmed the City's claim to the Outside Lands. The "Squatters", however, refused to abide by the decision. After many attempts on the part of the City to recover these lands a settlement giving the "Squatters" title to the greater portion of the land, but setting aside some 1,017 acres as municipal park lands, was reached.

In response to the growing demand for a large public park the Board of Supervisors invited Frederick Law Olmsted, the world famous landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York City and was in California as first chairperson of the Yosemite Park Commission, to advise on the location and design of a great urban park for San Francisco. After taking one look at the barren shifting sand dunes of the Outside Lands he declared it impossible to make a park of them and made design recommendations for an alternate site. Although Olmsted's specific recommendations were not followed, his philosophy, expressing the humanist values, of the urban park movement, influenced William Hammond Hall and gave impetus to the development of park lands in San Francisco.

In 1868 the Board of Supervisors passed legislation

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referred to as Order #800 which appraised land values and established public and private titles to the Outside Lands. This order which appraised the Golden Gate Park reservation at $801,593 was then submitted to Governor H.H. Haight for action, and on April 4, 1870 the State Legislature passed a bill known as "An Act to Provide for the Improvement of Public Parks in the City of San Francisco". Governor Haight promptly appointed Park Commissioners and the first meeting was held in May, 1870.

Shortly after its organization, and the issuance of development bonds, the Park Commission hired a young engineer, William Hammond Hall, to survey the park site. In 1871, at the age of 25, Hall was appointed the first Superintendent of Golden Gate Park.

The basic pattern of the Park's development as we see it today is essentially as he first devised it - the principal roads, forests, meadows, hills and valleys. The heavy grading which shaped the ground and sand dunes was done under his guidance. Striving to preserve the site's dramatic topography much as he found it, Hall altered the lay of the land only where necessary to protect plantings and people. Opposition to Hall's working with nature was expressed by those who preferred a formal and level site similar to the gardens at Versailles, as well as those who wished a cheap source of fill material for water front projects.

A committee of the State Assembly, appointed to "investigate the expenditures of public moneys by the Park Commissioners of San Francisco" accused Hall of "wanton and useless

destruction of one-third of all the trees planted", and extravagant spending on plant materials. Although Hall was vindicated of these charges by the testimony of Olmsted who confirmed that it was " standard practice in the initial setting out of trees in large amounts to thin the plantings by cutting", the investigation prompted Hall's resignation and a reduction of the Park budget. However, Hall agreed to remain as Consulting Engineer and Landscape Gardener to the Board, accepting the position without remuneration. In 1878 Hall joined the State Park Service as California's first State Engineer.

After Hall's resignation the general improvement and maintenance of the Park was severely curtailed due to the decreased budget and a rapid succession of superintendents, although many features were added through the generosity of public spirited citizens. Foremost among the many donations was the Conservatory (1877), the first of many permanent structures to be built in the Park.

In 1886 Mr. Hall again became the consulting Engineer/ Superintendent to a newly appointed Board of Park Commissioners to direct the work of rehabilitating a neglected Park. Children's Playground and the Sharon Building were constructed at this time. Frederick Law Olmsted, in a report to the new Park Commissioners warned that Park development requires "sustained observation and intelligent making of deductions. It has been the ruination of many such grounds to have them pass rapidly under successive managements. The artistic direction of work on such grounds should as far as possible, be continuous when once found fitting". Hall recommended the

appointment of John McLaren who became Assistant Superintendent in April of 1887 and Superintendent in 1890. McLaren was forty years old when he assumed his position and was described then as a landscape gardener "practically educated at the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens. He has for a number of years had charge of the best developed large private park grounds in California, and has therein had experience in just such plantations as we are trying to project at the Park". McLaren served as Superintendent for fifty-six years until his death in 1943.

Two major problems facing McLaren as they had faced Hall were the taming of the drifting sand and the maintenance of an adequate water supply. The sand reclamation, begun before McLaren was employed, had much success. McLaren's long tenure allowed him to complete a job well started. As the sand was anchored with grasses McLaren planted trees, many from seed which he received through his world-wide correspondence with horticulturists and nurserymen. McLaren loved trees; with them he created an abundant woodland, screening out the city with dense evergreen foliage establishing a true refuge from the strains of urban life.

As the Park developed, the need for an adequate supply of fresh water increased. The cultivation of large tree plantations requires plentiful water and the development of an irrigation system. Hall observed an "abundance of water to be had throughout the eastern portion of the reservation at a depth of 25 to 30 feet", and suggested artesian wells and a subterranean system of supply. Initially well water was pumped by steam engine furnishing 5,800 gallons per hour. However,

demand rapidly increased and storage capacity was inadequate. In 1873 the Commission negotiated with the Spring Valley Water Company for a supply of water. The problem of meeting the Spring Valley Water Company's water bill on the meager Park budget, and the increasing volume of water needed for the growing Park forced the Park Board to investigate other possibilities of underground water within the boundaries of the Park. Probing an area of the Park in what is now the Strybing Arboretum disclosed a virtually inexhaustible river of fresh water running at a depth of 140 feet. In 1885 the irrigation system, including the wells drilled in Strawberry Valley, was enlarged and a 1,000,000 gallon reservior was constructed on the slope of Strawberry Hill. An increased water supply was needed to develop the western end of the Park and the underground river was traced from Strawberry Valley to the beach. Many thought that the subterranean streams would yield salt water, but by 1907 two windmills were pumping up to 70,000 gallons of fresh water per hour to augment the Park's independent water supply. The mills operated until 1927 when electric pumps were installed.

Through the years additions and modifications have been made to the irrigation system to maintain water production and pressure to meet the Park's requirements. Today due to wear and sand shift only two of the five wells originally drilled in the Strawberry Valley (Arboretum) water works are still pumping water. Underneath the Park's pastoral landscape the vast network of irrigation piping, corroded in some sections and uncharted in others, still does not extend into wooded areas that may require reforestation.

demand rapidly exceeded the storage capacity and shortages. In 1973 the Commission negotiated with the Spring Valley Water Company for a supply of water. The problem of meeting the Spring Valley Water Company's water bill on the monthly fire budget, and the increasing volume of water needed for the dire fire forced the fire board to investigate other possibilities of underground water within the boundaries of the fire district. Finding an area of the Mesa to north it was thought that underground a vigorously reasonable river of fresh water running at a depth of ten feet. In 1975 the Commission started locating the well sites in Greenberry Valley, and sinking and a 1,000,000 gallon reservoir was constructed on the site of Strawberry Hill. An increased water supply was needed to develop the western end of the fire and the reservoir water was pumped from Greenberry Valley to Strawberry. Many thought that the underground stream would yield pure water, but by 1977 two wildcatting were drilling up to 1,000 gallons of fresh water per hour to augment the Fire District water supply. The mile operation until 1977 when other district pumps were installed.

Through the years additions and modifications have been made to the irrigation system to maintain water production and provide to meet the fire's requirements. Today due to water and sewer units only two of the fire's wells are currently used in the Greenberry Valley (Kingsburg) water units are still pumping water. Nevertheless the Fire's capacity, including the vast network of irrigation piping, reservoir to care accounts and upgraded in future, still does not present fire wooden units that may require replacement.

A turning point in the Park's development was the California Mid-winter Fair of 1894 which attracted 2,500,000 people and established a world wide reputation for Golden Gate Park. The Music Concourse and the Japanese Tea Garden, a popular attraction at the Fair, were retained as permanent features of the Park. At the turn of the century the new safety bicycles became an important mode for Park transport; park use increased as the cyclists requested more and smoother roads and pathways within the Park. By 1902 the automobile began to make its appearance in the Park. Though banned at first due to their frightening of horses and bicyclists, they were later allowed upon the payment of a fee of two dollars and the display of an "automobile permit". Car owners also requested that Park roads be made smoother and wider to accommodate their vehicles.

In 1906 Golden Gate Park sheltered thousands of homeless victims of the Great Earthquake and Fire. Trenches and ditches were dug across planted areas for sanitation and fresh water supplies. Tents and make-shift buildings were erected to provide temporary housing, and refugees were hired to grade and improve Park Presidio Avenue. It was more than a year before the Park was cleared of refugees and work to repair damage done to lawns, shrubbery and trees could begin.

In the decades following the earthquake the work of improvement continued under the direction of McLaren. Specialized horticultural features such as the Rhododendron Dell and Fuchsia gardens were established and numerous structures were added to the Park. The Academy of Sciences, originally located downtown, was totally destroyed in the catastrophe of 1906; in 1916 the Park Commissioners authorized the "temporary use of

the (Golden Gate Park) area" on which the Academy now rests. The Steinhart Aquarium was given to the City and its management undertaken by the Academy.. Plans for rebuilding the DeYoung Memorial Museum (damaged earlier by fire) were approved in 1916 and the completed building was formally presented to the city in 1921. The construction of Kezar Stadium (1924) was upsetting to John McLaren for the stables and nursery had to be moved, and in their place he was forced to accept what he called a "concrete monstrosity".

During the economic depression of the 1930's many projects for building and development in the Park were accomplished under the Works Progress Administration relief program. In March of 1937 the Commission urged the W.P.A. to expedite work on Crossover Drive and Park Presidio Bypass so that the completion of the "high speed roadway" would coincide with the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge. The Arboretum, the Anglers' Lodge, and Golden Gate Riding Academy were also constructed with the benefit of W.P.A. funding. By 1943, the year of McLaren's death, Park development was essentially complete.

Today, after more than 100 years, the Park remains a tribute to its creators. However, as the Park matured and rose to a position of international prominance its accessibility coupled with tremendous urban growth exposed its fragile texture. Many of the Park's trees, planted in the 1870's and essential for wind control, peripheral screening and spatial definition have reached maturity. The need for reforestation is apparent particularly in the western portion of the Park along the windbreak system. Automobile use in the Park,

especially commute traffic increasing through the years, threatens the safety of the visitor and severely errodes the beauty and serenity of the Park. Sensitive areas such as the Tea Garden and Music Concourse have begun to show unmistakable signs of simple overuse. The educational and cultural facilities in the Park, committed to reaching as many people as possible, have also become victims of their own popularity, finding both exhibition and staff space inadequate to meet their objectives. The Park's irrigation system, antiquated and inefficient, needs to be reconstructed to meet future requirements and lessen the Park's dependence upon the municipal water supply. Rising Park maintenance costs and the shrinking purchasing power of the dollar make it difficult to provide the level of maintenance required by the majestic woodland created by Hall and McLaren.

Today, conservation and civic organizations as well as individuals want to participate in the rehabilitation and enhancement of Golden Gate Park. The character and integrity of Hall's original design: a unique pastoral landscape, derived from the natural topography of the site, surrounding and sheltering cultural and recreational activity centers, will be retained in the Plan for Golden Gate Park.

Responding to Society's evolving needs, The Plan will establish guidelines for preservation, use and development ensuring the continuity of the Park's beauty and vigor now and into the future.

Compiled by:
Deborah Learner

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